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ABSTRACT

The author suggests ways in which the field of special education, specifically for mildly handicapped students, must reexamine its role and functions in light of budget cuts and threats of deregulation. He asserts that mainstreaming efforts must be reevaluated to assure that special education remains a part of general education in the community. Effects of increased class size and fiscal constraints on teachers' reluctance to accommodate differences in the classroom are noted. It is also suggested that regular classroom teachers need support in adapting curricula, technology, and presentation style. The importance of including the mildly learning disabled student in integrated rather than isolated school experiences is emphasized. (CL)

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* * PANEL PRESENTATION * *

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

PANEL PRESENTATION
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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1983

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The special education profession continues to reel from the nation's budgetary pressure and challenge to the comprehensiveness of our mission. During this period of economic transition, the topic of maintaining exceptional children in the mainstream has renewed our thinking of appropriate instructional environments. For the mildly handicapped, this issue has become of increased concern with the mixed messages received regarding future federal support for special education. Rather than glibly debating the benefits of continued program options, we should take this opportunity to reevaluate practices.

We have been coaxed into a false confidence and have become complacent with the protections afforded learning disabled students by federal legislation. Mandates, either state or federal, have been excessively focused on process and procedure. This has not enhanced or reinforced community commitment to its exceptionally citizenry. The recent threat of possible de-regulation generated much concern that school districts would not provide continued services if they became local options (EOH October, 1982).

The mainstreaming philosophy of the seventies needs to be re-evaluated in view of many emerging fiscal constraints. Competition for local school dollars has not been helped by special education's "favored status" which often differ from local priorities. In our zeal to provide alternatives, we've utilized self-contained and isolated instructional grouping patterns to achieve special educational goals. It may be time to focus these efforts and specialize our interventions, so that mild and moderately learning disabled students can remain in the most natural environment for instruction--the regular education classroom (Chandler 1982, Lilly 1971). There is a need to be proactive to assure that special education remains a part of--not a part from--the general education effort of the community.

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There is recognition that the term, mainstreaming, is not synonymous with placement in the least restrictive environment (Lieberman 1982, Hundert 1982). The LRE principle should not lead us into believing "success" will be enhanced by utilizing any arbitrary standard of eligibility for special instruction or any specific service delivery model (Phipps 1982, Lilly 1977). A meaningful correlation between evaluation results and ultimate placement continue to be suspect (Phipps 1982, Lieberman 1982). Program success is best defined as assisting exceptional children to become meaningful participants and demonstrate concrete growth. It is proposed the learning disabled student not leave the regular school program to achieve this goal. There is a realistic recognition that in some cases, due to a multiplicity and/or severity of needs, some learners may need a more structured experience (Audette 1982). It is felt, however, that this group is a minority and does not apply to the majority of learning disabled students in our public school.

There is an ever present variable that affects services for the atypical learner in the mainstream. The strain of local resources has resulted in a reluctance to accommodate difference and variance in the classroom program (Roddy & Eklund 1982). The number of referrals for "special" education is directly related to the ability and motivation of the classroom teacher to "individualize" (Roddy 1979). This tendency is even more severe in States that have gone through various tax referenda, be it Proposition X,Y or Z. The increase in general class size, due to reduction in force, for example, has had a dramatic effect on the number of mild and moderately learning disabled students referred for more restrictive placements (Roddy 1979).

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A supporting framework that specializes content, varies teacher presentation styles and student participation may be the necessary "supplementary aid", that is defined in the regulations, to achieve our quest of assisting children, remain in the least restrictive environment.

MODIFICATION OF CONTENT

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) continues to serve as the blueprint for the special education experience. It may make assumptions that perhaps can not be taken for granted, however. An analysis of program content by the specialist may be as important as the classroom observation procedure in determining appropriate teacher/learner match. The curricula expectation of the classroom teacher needs to be defined before any program of intervention can begin. Assistance that is practical and serves to highlight learning strengths as well as deficits is often overlooked in the program plan. This process of highlighting is positive in that it communicates to the learner those topics requiring emphasis. Development of sequential classroom experiences that increase proficiency in the basic skills also serve to enhance social participation (Schumaker, Sheldon-Wildgen & Sherman 1982). Special interventions to pre-teach vocabulary, clarify subject themes and define intra-subject relevance may be just the support needed to make the regular classroom program satisfying, productive and pleasurable (Mayle & Riegel 1979). This consideration is particularly important in view of the new barrage of instructional technology available in today's classrooms. A "filtering process" is required to make their use meaningful and productive for learning disabled students (Neumann 1982, Anderson & Glowinski 1982).

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MODIFICATION OF TEACHER PRESENTATION STYLE

The expectation that instruction in the resource room will be of lasting value is continually being challenged (Stokes & Baer 1977, Rose, Lessen & Gottlieb 1982). The concept of the resource room continues to be suspect if the presentation style is the same as the regular classroom--only in smaller groups. Much of the "tutoring" that has been provided is reminiscent of the "watered down and do it slowly" techniques of decades past. Whether the intervention addresses "processing deficits" or poor basic skills, positive interaction and productive experiences in the normal classroom are the goals that special education should be preparing for. The "train and hope" efforts of the past are in need of re-evaluation. The traditional approach to generalization of skills has far too long been special program specific. Systematic instruction that closely parallels the diagnostic information about students can successfully be provided in both special and regular classroom environments (Williams & Coleman, 1982). Cooperative learning models also change both the focus of "difference" as well as expand in-class alternatives (Johnson & Johnson 1982). The goal of making all education programs "individualized" need not be the lofty goal many have dismissed. Perhaps the need to take the genuine "risk" of sharing the special education "tricks of the trade" will work to the genuine advantage of not only intercollegial communication and co-action, but to better and more appropriate instruction for the learner (Lilly 1971).

MODIFICATION OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Our practice of providing special education in isolation appears to be over-used. The frequency and amount of time spent out of the regular classroom is no longer justified for mildly learning disabled students.

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In our goal of increasing proficiency, we continue to remediate those skills that are often not transferable to the regular education program. This conclusion is not arrived at lightly. The profession, itself, is starting to question if we are "disabling" students in our attempt to address their "handicaps" (Lieberman 1982). Oft times, we, with best intentions, create dependence that often be more debilitating than the educational handicap we identify and attempt to ameliorate.

The benefit of participating in heterogeneous instructional groups has long demonstrated its worth. The manner of participation should have the focus of enhancing exceptional students' success in the regular classroom. Traditionally, the IEP has defined the activities of special instruction. There has been little attention paid to the manner in which the regular education program can be made "special". This practice should be revised so that isolated instruction is continued only to the point where a child becomes instructionally compatible with some group in the regular classroom program. If national trends continue, we will find increased numbers of "veteran teachers" surviving RIF procedures. This may indirectly serve the needs of learners who need a rich classroom environment with many program alternatives.

Rather than become "battle" weary from continually defending our efforts, we need to refocus on the guiding principle that has made special education the rewarding venture it is. In summary, the author is reminded of a tale that best defines that principle:

> A long time ago, a king and queen reigned over a modest kingdom that was of moderate resources. They had one possession, however, that was very important to the royal family--a gem. Along the way, their gem suffered damage and was severely scratched. The king and queen were most upset with this occurrence and sought

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out the many resources available to them to remove the damage. Unfortunately, the wizards and magicians in the kingdom were frustrated in their failure to remove the laceration. Sadly, the damage was so severe that the gem's diffusion of light was most distracting. Realizing the reality of their loss, the king and queen were in despair and sought only to comfort each other and minimize the damage and their loss.

A jester, overhearing their cries of sadness, asked the royal family if he might take the jewel for awhile. With the king's permission, the jester left with the stone.

The jester, after much thought and many hours with the jewel, began to make further scratches on the face of the gem. At the top of the original cut, he fashioned the petals of a flower, and midway on the scratch made impressions of leaves and buds. Completing his task, he returned the stone to the family. Their outrage was predictable. "How dare you further scratch our jewel! We wanted the scratch and the damage removed." The jester stood erect, holding the stone in his hands to catch the magic of the light. "Your Highness, you and your wife sought out many specialists and exhausted your limited resources, in hopes of removing the defect. I have humbly changed the jewel so that when people view it they will see the image of a flower rather than the ugliness of the defect. I have attempted to change the scar so people will see it as a stem, a source of life, natural beauty and potential. Sadly, Your Highness, the damage will be ever-present. I have only sought to change it in some way so people will see loveliness and beauty, rather than ugliness and damage."

Perhaps it is now time to take a lesson from the jester, and re-articulate the goal of special education. Let us renew our commitment and faith in assisting our nation's children, so people see their beauty and potential without removing them from the most natural environment for unreasonable amounts of time, in our quest of service them.

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